

Japanese government seeks to defuse opposition to nuclear industry

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Five months on from the devastating March 11 earthquake and nuclear disaster, the Japanese government has modified the country's nuclear regulatory structure in a bid to defuse mounting opposition to the nuclear power industry. This week the environment minister was put in charge of a new Nuclear Safety Agency, created by merging two monitoring agencies.

The announcement came amid rising concerns among ordinary people about radiation levels, and continuing opposition to the reopening of nuclear reactors. Local communities across Japan have refused to allow the restart of reactors certified by the existing Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA), resulting in nearly three-quarters of the country's 54 commercial reactors being shut down.

NISA and its supervising agency, the Nuclear Safety Commission, have been widely discredited over their role in the disaster at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant, where the earthquake and tsunami cut off all power, leading to the meltdown of three reactors. NISA, which had prime responsibility for nuclear regulation, was under the control of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, which also had a mandate to promote the interests of Japan's nuclear industry.

Goshi Hosono, the minister officially in charge of the nuclear accident, told the media that "strong political leadership" was needed to bring the Fukushima situation under control after such a "disastrous accident". Yet, all those responsible for the catastrophe—the government, its agencies, and the plant's owner Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO)—are continuing to treat the victims with contempt.

Because of radiation dangers, schoolchildren across Fukushima Prefecture remain stuck indoors, banned from their own school playgrounds, unable to play in local parks and kept inside by their parents. Schools are engaged in the complex process of removing the contaminated topsoil from their grounds, despite often having nowhere to dump the soil, except in holes dug in the same grounds.

The recently released results of a scientific survey

conducted in March, show that out of one thousand children tested in the prefecture, nearly half tested positive for thyroid exposure to radiation. Hiroshima University professor Satoshi Tashiro said the children should continue to be monitored, possibly for the rest of their lives, even though the iodine-131 levels were low and unlikely to pose a serious health threat.

At the Sakura Nursery school in Fukushima City, 60 kilometres from the nuclear plant, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation this week reported that principal Michiko Saito walks around the playground every morning with a Geiger counter. "Children and babies are said to be vulnerable to radiation, but the authorities have moved too slowly to help schools," she said. "There are so many kids living in so-called radiation hot-spots but not enough is being done to look after them."

Parents at the nursery school complained about a lack of information from the government. "There were news reports that radioactive caesium has been found in mother's milk," Akiko Yoshida, a mother of two infants, said. "We have not received enough accurate information at all. That's why some families evacuated immediately while others stayed."

According to the Fukushima Prefectural Board of Education, by the end of the school summer vacation on August 25, about 60 percent of public schools surveyed would have completed work to remove topsoil. The authority said decontamination work had reduced radiation by 70 to 80 percent in many places. At the same time, the board reported that about 600 of the 735 swimming pools at kindergartens and schools in the prefecture could not be drained of their tainted water because the water would flow into sewage systems or agricultural waterways.

Some 100,000 Fukushima Prefecture residents have evacuated from their homes, and about 14,000 elementary and junior high school students have moved to other schools. Many parents decided to transfer their children despite safety assurances from the Education Ministry, which seriously weakened radiation standards in schools on May 25, allowing students to be exposed to 20 times the amount

previously permissible. That meant children were permitted to be exposed to 20 millisieverts a year, as much as a German nuclear power plant worker.

Rare video footage of the anger among these families emerged on the Internet last month. It showed nuclear emergency management officials being hounded out of a local citizens' forum on July 19 after refusing to test a child's urine sample for radiation or agree with a questioner that the residents had "a right to avoid radiation exposure and live a healthy life".

At the Fukushima nuclear plant itself, the situation remains serious. Temperatures inside reactors 1, 2 and 3, each of which have suffered some degree of meltdown, remain above the safe levels required for what is known as a cold shutdown. TEPCO officials reported earlier this month that still-unexplained radiation levels had been detected between reactors 1 and 2. The readings of 10,000 millisieverts per hour were high enough to be fatal if a worker received a single exposure of an hour or more. The annual radiation limit for a nuclear worker is just 250 millisieverts.

The company has also admitted this month to making little or no progress in reducing the volume of more than 120,000 tonnes of highly radioactive water at the plant. The water accumulated in basements and tunnels after the cooling systems of three reactors were breached and TEPCO had to resort to pumping water directly into the reactor cores.

The toxic water has to be removed and normal cooling systems established in order to bring the reactors fully under control. Since July 2, TEPCO has been using a Japanese-French-American system to decontaminate the water. Yet because of constant pipe clogging and other difficulties, including leaks, the purification rate remains about one-third below the goal of 90 percent. The amount of radioactive water has actually increased in recent weeks, partly because of inflows from typhoon rains.

Unless the purification rate improved, the treatment of water would continue into 2012, the *Mainichi Daily News* reported, further delaying shutdown plans. Junichi Matsumoto, deputy head of the company's nuclear power division, told a media conference on August 3: "The number of technical problems has decreased but we still can't say operations have been stabilised."

The government has left TEPCO in charge of the emergency response, despite the company's decades-long record of downplaying safety dangers, covering-up safety incidents and falsifying reports to regulators. Such was the seriousness of the breakdown in the facility, the extent of the damage, and the chaotic, unprepared character of the response, that it took TEPCO almost three months to confirm that meltdowns had occurred in reactors 1, 2 and 3.

Company and government officials acknowledge that they

still do not know the specific condition of the reactor cores. According to *Asahi Shinbun* this week, a report by Fumiya Tanabe, a former senior researcher at the government-affiliated Japan Atomic Energy Research Institute, indicates that a second meltdown may have occurred in the No. 3 reactor between March 21 and 23. On those days, the volume of water pumped into the reactor dropped sharply, and radiation levels increased in areas downwind from the plant.

Reports in the *Wall Street Journal* revealed on August 16 that thousands of people living near the Fukushima facility were initially evacuated to areas where winds blew plumes of radiation from the explosions that rocked the plant after the earthquake. Officials in Tokyo knew from meteorological data that the areas had become radiation hotspots, and informed the government, but a week passed before the residents were alerted. Tamotsu Baba, the mayor of Namie, a coastal town, accused government representatives of failing to protect the residents. Interviewed by the newspaper, he said: "We walked straight into areas where radiation levels were the highest. I told them it was tantamount to an act of murder."

The Kan government's efforts to smother these issues by establishing a new regulatory agency are matched by those of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Its website has not published updates from Fukushima since June 2. Instead, the site's front-page promotes claims of improved safety at nuclear installations globally. Not just in Japan but internationally, attempts are being made to bury the Fukushima disaster and sweep the plight of its victims under the carpet in order to protect the huge profit interests at stake.



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